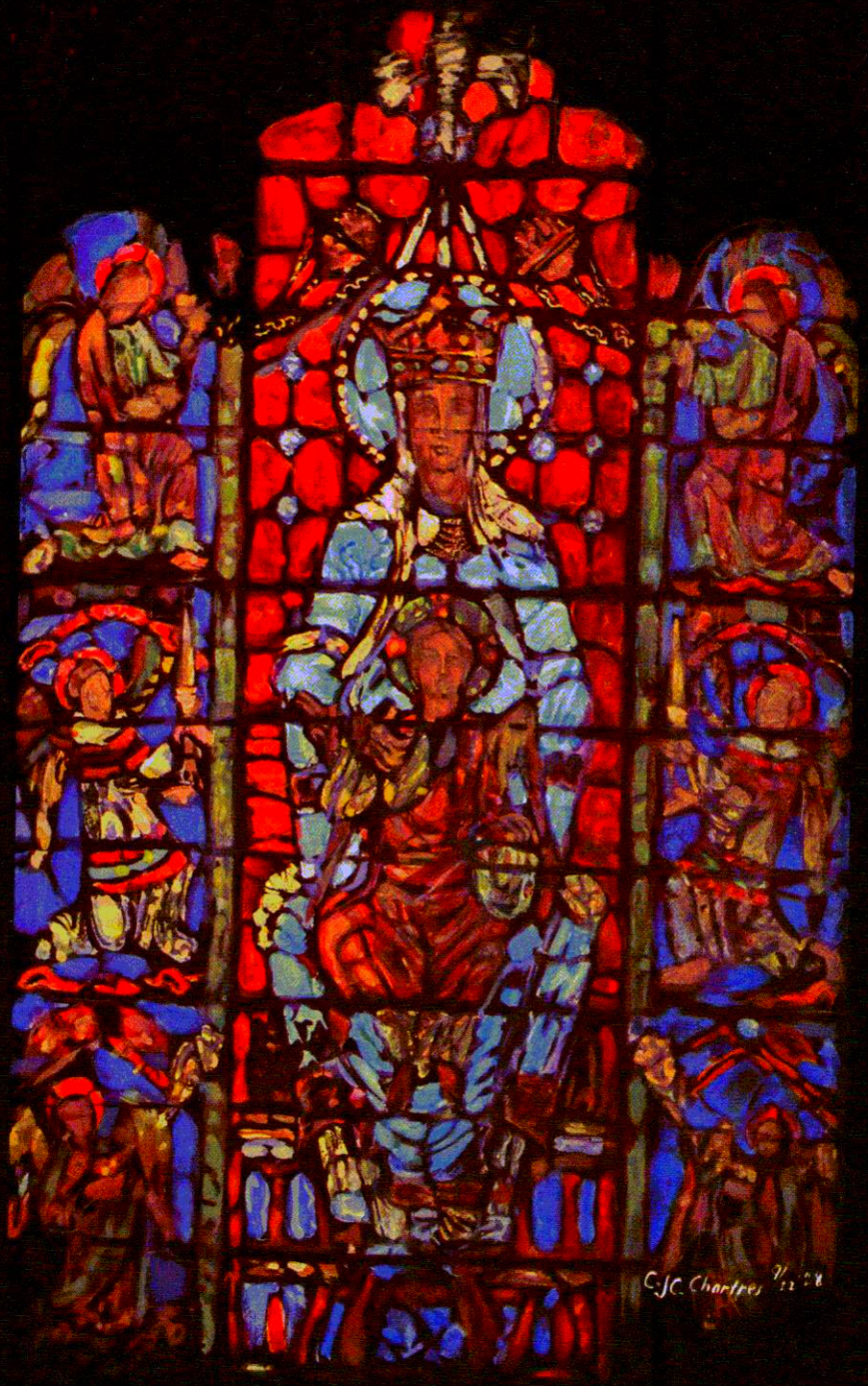

1 A. Detail of « Beautiful Window » (South), Chartres
Early afternoon — Autumn.

"La Belle Verrière" of Infinite Variety

(Reprinted from the *American Magazine of Art*)

SINCE my first visit to Chartres Cathedral, many years ago, I have been fascinated by the changing beauty of its windows in varying lights. The window that first intrigued me with its volatile loveliness was in the south ambulatory. It had candles before it to mark it as a shrine and to recall its ancient title: "Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière." I had heard it spoken of as the most famous window in the world and had read that the dominant figure had been rescued from the fire of 1197 and arranged in its present setting by a thirteenth century master. But I had never been told of its bewildering metamorphoses. It seemed to vibrate in a fluid sort of light that melted imperceptibly into variations, or that suddenly flamed into abrupt changes.

When I first noticed the encroachment of a cool shadow upon its brilliantly lighted areas, I began to realize the importance of the great flanking buttresses. They rarely left the surface of the window untouched by shadow on a sunny day. Even on gray days, those buttresses were in evidence as I approached the window from either direction. Once, after a shower on a summer forenoon, a ray of sunlight over the edge of the eastern buttress played a gracious prank with the window. It lighted a great part of the Blessed Virgin's figure, enhancing its limpid blue against a shadow suddenly grown deeper. Then it vanished so quickly that it seemed like magic. The fleeting vision also held a pointed practical message for me as a student of stained glass. It said in terms of beauty that were unforgettable: "A stained glass window is the color of the weather. It is at the mercy of light and of all that happens in the path of its light."

Like most people interested in the arts, I had been trained to look at pictures to such excellent purpose that I had to learn anew to look at windows, balanced in light. It took many such experiences to teach me the essential changeableness of color-in-light. Therefore I can well understand why conceptions of this great window are so often confused with ideas related to static pictures. Reproductions in black and white from photographs help to strengthen such impressions. They are obviously inadequate and suggest the bald honesty of x-ray portraits. But the line engraving most frequently reproduced is especially misleading in its hard delineation of paint lines and lead lines

with no suggestion of color or of dissolving light. It no longer surprises me to see other copies and descriptions of it in constantly increasing variety. Artists and writers have been devoted to it for so long that some comments and reproductions are familiar to all of us. If we pause to study a group of them together, we find records so different as to suggest different windows. But they may all be accurate records. Possibly each one has caught and expressed a definite truth related to it.

A patient and devoted glassman was once intent upon making a true representation of the central figure. He had a scaffold erected and arranged so that he could paint the entire central design somewhat reduced in scale, with the glass itself almost under his nose. He exclaimed in surprise, after a few minutes on his lofty perch, that the colors had a false appearance to one on the floor. He demonstrated the fact to interested sceptics by getting them to climb his steep ladder after him. He proceeded to paint each piece of glass as he saw it in its setting of black lead and heavier tones. The result was singularly unattractive, dry and hard. It looked like a map of the jewelled region he had studied, with none of its spirited, elusive glamour. He had copied everything but its activity in light, its real charm. He could have defended his work convincingly, for, from his point of view, he was perfectly right. Those background pieces were brilliant vermilion; the drapery was light true cobalt; the whites were tints of green and gray-blue. The curious violet-tan of the Christ Child's garment and the golds that ranged from straw to pumpkin color were honestly set forth, as were the cool and warm greens and spots of deep blue. The whole range would be considered representative of the twelfth century glass man's palette. But what a curious relationship to the cool splendor of the window those painted panels seemed to have when they were ranged on the floor in front of it! Two Frenchmen whispering together spoke resentfully of the drawing. They said it looked like an anatomical chart. How shrewdly that remark suggested its stripped, raw look! But it was evident that they didn't know what the matter was.

That thoroughgoing mediaevalist, Viollet-le-Duc, would have known. He commented pointedly, but sympathetically, upon a lithograph in color of the Tree of Jesse window, conceived and developed in the same honest fashion. He praised its accurate drawing, but said the entire production was lifeless and misleading. His unique analysis of the interplay of colors in

the window itself, their spreading in light and the devouring of blacks by light, gave him vision of a thing pulsing and vital. He spoke more like a scientist than a poet or a painter, for he saw light at work in subtle ways usually overlooked by those who try to account for the fascination of a stained glass window.

The radiation of color in light is a simple and obvious phenomenon. You have probably noticed that glass in ordinary signal lamps seems to grow in size when the light snaps on, even in broad daylight. You may have observed, too, if you are sensitive to color, that some colors radiate or spread more than others. Blue is the color that radiates most; green, red, and yellow follow with receding power. But the matter cannot be covered so simply, for the transparency or translucency of the glass itself is also a factor. Everyone has noticed how a tiny hole, in a semi-opaque curtain, will spread and assume amazing size at a distance against a strong light. Similarly, a small clear spot of white in the translucent red background of a base figure in the north transept window at Chartres has a value many times its size when it is seen from the floor of the cathedral.

The same law operates to increase the effectiveness of the light limpid blue of the Blessed Virgin's figure against the more opaque red background. (That field of smoldering warmth is more opaque because it is more deeply marked by patina and corrosion.) Distance, quality of glass, and the power of the light itself are all factors, naturally enough, in the action of light as it spreads color and devours blacks. Whether light seems to turn a solid tee-bar into a tenuous line, to eat up painted patterns, or to devour the patina or corrosion of centuries, its activity marks the peculiar genius of the stained glass window. That vibrant quality is not only its most enduring charm; it is its greatest hazard. It makes the craft a field of adventure where luck seems to follow the brave spirit who dares to experiment in colored light as Abt Volger ventured forth in music. He may realize with him and with the unknown creator of La Belle Verrière a region of miracles, where: "Out of three sounds he frame not a fourth sound, but a star."

It is in this region of changing values that one can accept strangely varied records of "La Belle Verrière."

In a blazing summer sun, when you are directly in its path, you will have glimpses of the pure vermilion and the piercing light blue that the careful copyist painted on his wooden panels. The colors will be glowing and melting into each other, but you will probably recognize them. If you wait, or come later in the

day, you will see the soft shadow of the western buttress slowly temper that brilliance until you are reminded of Henry Adams' words of it:

> A strange, almost uncanny feeling seems to haunt this window, heightened by the veneration in which it was long held as a shrine. . . . The charm is partly due to the beauty of the angels, supporting, saluting, and incensing the Virgin and Child with singular grace and exquisite feeling, but rather of the thirteenth than of the twelfth century. . . . The effect of the whole, in the angle which is always dark or filled with shadow, is deep and sad, as though the Empress felt her authority fail, and had come down to reproach us for neglect. The face is haunting.

Henry Adams must have seen the window most often on gray days, or late afternoons, for he leaves us no hint of sunny splendors, or of the soft fifty changes between sunlight and shadow.

A blanket of snow does wonderful things to windows, and my own guess is that the following description by Louis Gillet, published in a Christmas edition of a great French periodical,* was influenced by a day of quiet lights when the ground was covered with snow:

> The famous window which represents the Queen of the Heavens crowned by angels and holding her Son upon her knees. Majestic figure, garbed in heavenly blue and the radiance of the sun, limpid aquamarine in relief against a background of incomparable purple, nobler than Cimabue himself ever painted; transparent and divine, allowing us to understand, through her presence, her immortal maternity and this child birth which touched her body no more than the beams of light injures the glass in its passage. Virgin doubly well named, Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière.

They are all quite right, these copyists and poets; the windows they describe and many others are inherent in the Beautiful Window. These men are adventurers too, in their own right, like him who:

> Would write in a book the morning's prime
> Or match with words a tender sky.

C. J. C.

* *L'Illustration, 1928.*

2 A. Detail of « Beautiful Window » (South), Chartres
Late afternoon — Autumn.